

GANDHI'S RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN ASIA

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THE QUESTION OF QUESTIONS WHICH IS FACING MANKIND TODAY IS that of War. In this Atomic Age, positional warfare of the classical kind seems to have become temporarily outmoded. Perfection in atomic bombs is being used more for the sake of securing political advantages, while in many parts of the world, men have progressively lapsed into cruder and more primitive ways of killing their opponents, while guerrilla tactics have largely replaced the more conventional forms of warfare.

Along with this development on one side, there is proceeding, on the other, a more frantic, but sincere attempt, to build up a consensus that all sovereign States should surrender part of their sovereignty and take recourse to constitutional, legal modes of settling disputes in some kind of a world assembly, or, if possible, a world court.

This desire to settle points of dispute in a civil manner is more in evidence among nations like the U.S. or Russia, for perhaps they realize much more effectively than other nations the dangers that they will have to face if a full-scale atomic war breaks out in the world. Smaller nations, however, do not realize the dangers to the same extent. They have not enough arms of their own; and they have proved their fondness for toying with war, particularly when the supply of either arms or of air-force comes to them as a gift or a loan from more powerful patrons. Their hunger for power, or thirst for battle, remains unsatiated; and they are consequently tempted more by powerful weapons of destruction than those who have actually succeeded in perfecting them.

A large part of Asia has thus become an arena where many immaturely modernized societies are battling with one another for securing more arms; so that they can establish political power and consolidate the 'national' unity of scattered communities who have so long lived, more or less, in economic isolation from one another within the boundaries of their State. But besides this endeavor to establish a firm nationalism, there is also another idea which seems to be operating among a progressively growing section of the masses over this widespread area.

This is the demand for social justice; and it is obvious that, among the rising educated and partly westernized classes of Asia, there is an earnest desire to establish social and economic equality where people had hitherto been divided into rich and poor, land-owning and landless agricultural

classes, or where, under the domination of Western powers, large masses of men were torn out of their secluded self-sufficiency, and thrown into the whirlpool of international commercial markets in which they completely lost their political independence.

This underlying desire for national consolidation, freedom, and social justice has given rise to serious outbreaks of violence, in country after country in the Asian continent, which have in consequence been subjected to untold hardships and suffering. And, in many cases, the results of these violent outbreaks have been very far from those anticipated or desired. The masses have often been treated as pawns in a game played by others for the securement of power.

If we look at it from the broad perspective, more smoke appears to come out of these countries than fire. But the fact that smoke arises should itself prove to be an indication of the fire which burns within. Revolutionists may imagine that by blowing up the dying embers, flames would burst out once more in their full glory, and the Revolution will come. But who knows that a premature revolution may not also die out in the process? If the revolutionist believes that, eventually, victory will surely come to the toiling millions, then obviously he depends more upon faith than on reason. One can, of course, admit that if his faith is unshakable, that factor alone may help in turning the course of events in his favour, if he works with intelligence and determination.

But then, one must admit that this need of a faith, which sustains even when the embers of revolution throw up no more than volumes of smoke, has become a great necessity in large parts of the continent of Asia. It is as if there has grown up a demand for a *new religion* which is to take the place of the old, which is no longer able to grapple with the complexities of the times. And, our suggestion is that this new faith has been growing up in one country after another round the name of Marx and of Lenin.

Among other countries, India has also been subject to some of the forces described above. There is the same demand for social justice, the same growth of a new faith, which have been leading some parts of India into paths of violence and revolution. But, fortunately for us in India, we have seen, in our own time, the rise of another revolutionary force under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The social or economic order for which he worked is no less revolutionary in character than that of the most ardent Marxian. But there was one difference which marked off the Gandhian method completely from the Marxian way, as we see it in operation in our land.

While comparing his ideals with those of Socialists, Gandhi once wrote about himself in the following terms:

According to me the economic constitution of India, and for that matter that of the world, should be such that no one under it should suffer from want of food and clothing. In other words, everybody should be able to get sufficient

work to enable him to make the two ends meet. And this ideal can be universally realized only if the means of production of the elementary necessities of life remain in the control of the masses. These should be freely available to all as God's air or water are or ought to be; they should not be made a vehicle of traffic for the exploitation of others. Their monopolization by any country, nation or group of persons would be unjust. The neglect of this simple principle is the cause of the destitution that we witness today, not only in this unhappy land, but in other parts of the world too.¹

Again:

Violence is no monopoly of any one party. I know Congressmen who are neither socialists nor communists, but who are frankly devotees of the cult of violence. Contrariwise, I know socialists and communists who will not hurt a fly, but who believe in the universal ownership of the instruments of production. I rank myself as one among them.²

On another occasion, he wrote: "I am essentially a non-violent man, and I believe in war bereft of every trace of violence."³

This leads us to the question of the difference which exists between the method of war and that of non-violence, as Gandhi tried to develop it during a long course of its application in India for the establishment of political, social and economic justice.

If we have understood the Communist viewpoint rightly, it appears that they hold that the power of the State forms the keystone in any social structure. It is through it that the exploiters consolidate and maintain their power of depriving the working classes of a large portion of the fruits of their labor. Revolution must therefore be planned to win State power, for the sake of placing it under the dictatorship of the proletariat. If the proletariat are not sufficiently organized, then the Communist Party must act on their behalf. They must capture the State, and, first of all, liquidate all the forces which act against the interests of the working classes. When this task of liquidation is accomplished, then the State will become progressively superfluous and its place will gradually be taken over by the working people's own voluntary organizations which do not depend on force for their continuance; and thus the State will wither away in the course of time.

Gandhi, however, felt that, taking human nature as it is, the State will continue to remain as far as he could see into the future. The task of liquidating the power of the State must therefore begin right here and now. In India, he did organize a fairly large number of voluntary organizations for the sake of building up the economic strength of the agriculturists, for the spread of universal education, the eradication of social segregation, and so on. Such tasks were not to wait until the State had come under the control of the masses. And he firmly believed, that while some men and

¹ Bose, Nirmal Kumar, *Selections From Gandhi*. Ahmabad, Navajivan Publishing Co., 1968. p. 38.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

women might and should be involved in non-violent non-cooperation, intended to 'regulate authority when abused,' millions must devote themselves to the constructive task of building up, at least, the rudiments of an exploitation-free society. That model would undoubtedly expand rapidly when the power of the State came into the hands of those who represented the masses, and gave primacy to the interests of the latter. But the beginning had to be, and could be made, as we have said, even under the difficulties of existing conditions, when power was largely denied to them.

The reason why he thought that the Constructive Programme, as he called it, was as important and vital an element in the revolution as direct action, in the shape of non-violent resistance, was two-fold. All men were not going to be fighters in the front line, even if the war were to be a non-violent one. Millions of sympathetic people could, however, work in the second line, and engage in building up the model of a non-violent society of the future. He thus wanted to harness the active energy of the masses to the maximum extent. Secondly, Gandhi felt that, if power came, even by means of civil disobedience of a chosen section of the population, it would tend to remain limited to this group alone, and would not diffuse among the rest of the population.

Gandhi's views regarding the transference of power from one class to another exclusively through constitutional means was also of the same nature. He was more interested in seeing power dispersed in as large a fraction of the masses as possible. And he thought that this could be best achieved through an intelligent combination of Constructive Activity and of Civil Disobedience, which should come when the time was opportune for it.

The reason why there is a certain amount of frustration in India is that today, all the plans of our political parties have tended to rely very largely upon the State machinery for bringing about necessary social and economic change. Those who rule the States, or are in-charge of the Central Government, believe that all that has to be done is to reform and utilize the State for the establishment of a socialistic pattern of economy, which is the accepted goal of the Indian Republic. Those who are not in power feel that, if they, *i.e.* their Party, were at the helm of affairs, they would set everything right.

And, guided as the masses are by one political Party or another, they have been led into an extreme reliance upon the State and the governmental machinery for the redress of all their grievances.

This passion for acquiring the power of the State is the new superstition which seems to have enveloped India, as it also seems to have over-powered some of the neighboring countries in a like manner.

The Gandhian way offers an alternative. As we said earlier, when there was a genuine and widespread demand for social justice, Gandhi did not merely try to steer it in the direction of a quick revolution. Instead

of proposing quicker political action, he sought to organize and educate the people, until he felt once more that a crisis had arisen which could only be dealt with by militant but fully non-violent non-cooperation means.

Today, the violence, or its negative counterpart, namely, frustration or a feeling of utter helplessness, is choking our lungs like the smoke which rises from a badly lit fire. Gandhi showed us the way, in his time, to creatively and constructively utilize the fire which burns within, so that we would never be invaded by hopelessness and lack of faith.

Obviously, if he had been alive today, the nature of his Constructive Programme, and even the character of non-violent resistance, if necessary, would have been intelligently designed by him in order to adapt them to the conditions prevailing today. That task yet remains as a challenge and an opportunity for those who have, through experience, retained a faith in the Gandhian way.

And this is why many of us believe firmly in the increased relevance of the Gandhian method, not only in India, but in all lands where the masses have yet to win their freedom from inequality and injustice under which they have laboured so long.